

MMS' Failure Will Continue Without Real Reform

British Petroleum's (BP) Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded off the Gulf Coast more than 100 days ago and we have witnessed the devastation ever since. Oil has washed ashore from Texas to Florida and the lives of millions of Americans have been put on hold. The magnitude of the spill exposed the inadequacy of BP's emergency response and raised serious questions about the effectiveness of the Department of Interior's oversight of offshore drilling.

The BP oil spill was just the latest chapter in a long history of regulatory and ethical failures at the Interior Department and the Minerals Management Service (MMS). It is apparent that over the last decade, MMS essentially permitted the oil industry to police itself – allowing BP and other companies in the industry to pick and choose which regulations they would follow. At the same time, the number of oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico expanded dramatically and further into much deeper waters while the agency remained at approximately the same size.

After the oil spill, Secretary Salazar proposed a sweeping reorganization of MMS that would split the agency into three separate departments, The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement and the Office of Natural Resources Revenue. To get a better understanding of the proposed changes, [I convened a House Oversight and Government Reform Committee hearing recently](#) where we were able to ask Interior Secretary Salazar and Michael Bromwich, the new director of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), critical questions about the reorganization.

According to Secretary Salazar, the necessary checks and balances have been implemented to prevent unethical behavior within the three new entities. The ethics and enforcement standards for all employees were strengthened, and more rigorous safeguards were implemented to separate royalty collection from the safety and environmental oversight tasks.

We also discussed concerns related to conflicts of interest and revenue collections. Secretary Salazar explained that recommendations from the Department's Inspector General have been adopted and he highlighted the termination of the Royalty-in-Kind program that will reduce the likelihood of fraud or collusion within the oil and gas industry. He also stated that as the department evaluates new areas for oil and gas exploration, they will conduct a thorough environmental analysis and examine the potential safety and spill risks before approving plans to drill.

Michael Bromwich was chosen to lead BOEM because of his experience as an Inspector General at the Justice Department and his demonstrated ability to turn around failing institutions. After leaving the Justice Department he helped reform police departments around the country before working in private practice where he conducted several internal investigations for companies in a variety of industries. Mr. Bromwich expressed to the committee that he is determined to promptly respond to any allegations or evidence of misconduct or unethical behavior between BOEM employees and the oil and gas industry. He also made clear that he is determined to improve the bureau's ability to respond to issues and crises, like the Deepwater Horizon spill, as quickly as possible.

I am encouraged by Secretary Salazar's and Director Bromwich's dedication to put common sense reforms in place that will strengthen the oversight of the oil industry. Although the agency has much work to do, I remain optimistic reform will occur.

This blog originally appeared on [Huffington Post](#)